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King, Thompson, Reichert, Pascrell, McCaul, Etheridge introduce Katrina “Lessons Learned” Legislation

Washington, D.C. (Thursday, May 11, 2006)—Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Peter T. King (R-NY), Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS), Reps. Dave Reichert (R-WA) and Bill Pascrell (D-NJ), Chairman and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Science, and Technology, and Reps. Michael McCaul (R-TX) and Bob Etheridge (D-NC), Chairman and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Investigations, detailed H.R. 5351, the National Emergency Management Reform and Enhancement Act of 2006, at a press conference with U.S. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Joe Lieberman (D-CT). The Senators joined them in urging reforms contained in the legislation.

The bill, introduced today, takes steps to improve communication and coordination at the federal, state, and local levels; strengthen disaster preparedness and response capabilities nationwide; and eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse.

“Since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck last year, Members of our Committee have met repeatedly with the local and state-level first responders and emergency coordinators, people who were on the ground and understand where our response fell short and what needs to be done to correct it,” King said. “And I’m proud to say that their input—and the suggestions of first responders like them all across the country—played a major role in the substance of this legislation. I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to pass this importance piece of legislation as quickly as possible.”

“After seeing the destruction of last year’s hurricanes and daily dialogue with our nation’s first responders and emergency managers, we have come up with a real remedy to heal this ailing agency,” Thompson said. “Our legislation would equip the Department with the right tools, resources, guidance and leadership it needs to deal with any disaster our country may face.”

“As someone who has spent more than 30 years as a first responder, I know that the success of disaster response hinges on how well it is executed at the local level,” Reichert said. “Emergency management at the federal level will be greatly enhanced by adopting a bottom-up strategy that helps local governments be more effective. Our legislation emphasizes the

need to plan, train, and exercise in a coordinated manner with State, local, and tribal governments. By doing so, we will truly establish a national emergency management system.”

“The fact of the matter is this: Our government’s ability to prepare and respond to a disaster is fatally flawed. We’ve seen the chilling consequences of these deficiencies. It is our moral imperative to fix the situation,” Pascrell said. “After viewing the carnage left in the wake of last year’s hurricane season, and working closely with the first responders who managed the chaos, I feel strongly that we can best prepare America for a large scale emergency incident by preserving and strengthening FEMA’s role within DHS.”

“As someone who has seen first-hand the devastation that a Katrina or Rita-strength hurricane can cause, I understand the great importance of ensuring an effective federal response; and this is exactly what this legislation will do,” McCaul said. “This vital legislation puts FEMA on the ground where the crisis is occurring instead of the agency trying to manage the catastrophe from Washington; and with the fraud prevention measures included in this legislation, Americans impacted by a Katrina-like event won't become victims of crimes on top of being victims of mother nature or a man-made crisis. We've learned from our mistakes in the past, and this legislation will help make sure those mistakes are not repeated.”

“During Hurricane Katrina America saw how truly devastating hurricanes can be when preparedness and emergency management are neglected. With hurricane season less than a month away, we do not have time to waste,” Etheridge said. “We must begin strengthening FEMA as soon as possible. In North Carolina we know well that we cannot stop another hurricane from landing, but Congress can and must take steps to reduce the number of lives and the amount of property that are lost. The legislation that we are introducing will take the steps necessary to ensure that FEMA can effectively prepare for and respond to any disaster – be it natural or man made. I am pleased that our colleagues in the Senate have joined us in our mission to strengthen FEMA, making this a bipartisan and bicameral effort.”

The Members explained that the legislation would:

Streamline Coordination and Communication at the Federal, State, and Local Levels

- Establishes two Deputy Under Secretary positions - one for Emergency Preparedness and Mitigation and one for Emergency Response and Recovery - both of whom will be well-qualified and report directly to the Under Secretary, to increase coordination between FEMA and local first responders;
- Establishes DHS Regional Offices and Regional Directors to work in partnership with state and local governments, and emergency response and support providers, to ensure coordination and integration of regional preparedness and response activities;
- Grants the Regional Director, in a time of crisis, the ability to coordinate and direct the federal response within the operational area, and make operational decisions without having to obtain approval from headquarters, vastly improving response time; and
- Creates an Assistant Secretary for Emergency Communications, who will be responsible for helping establish and maintain interoperable communications capabilities at

all levels of government, ensuring first responders on the ground can communicate with one another.

Improve Preparedness and Response Measures Nationwide

- Requires DHS to develop national standards for first responder training and a comprehensive, uniform program for the training of homeland security personnel and first responders at all levels of government;
- Establishes FEMA as a Directorate of Emergency Management, consolidating DHS' Directorate of Preparedness within FEMA, to increase coordination between FEMA and local first responders;
- Elevates the head of FEMA to an Under Secretary, who will serve as the President's principal advisor on emergency management and report directly to the President in times of national emergency and crises; and
- Mandates better DHS oversight of administered federal benefits, and establishes proper internal management controls to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse.

“With another hurricane season just around the corner, the time to act is now,” King said. “DHS must be equipped with the proper resources, communications, and leadership to handle a worst case scenario and provide a rapid, coordinated, and effective response. That is exactly what this legislation will accomplish.”